

KAMADEVA: THE GOD OF DESIRE

Useful knowledge about the qualities of desire can be gathered from the stories and artwork involving Kamadeva: the god of sensual love. For instance, readers and viewers learn that love and desire are rooted in the mind and penetrate the body's senses, can be lost but found, and are evoked through memory (Benton 181, 182). In contrast, love and desire are deceptively beautiful, manipulative, maddening, difficult to control, and can cause pain even when they are not visible (Benton 182). Therefore, Kamadeva is called many names, including Madana, which connotes an enthralling and even maddening aspect, Ananga, the intangible, Kandarpa, suggestive of pride, and Manmatha, he who makes the intellect uncertain (Fausboll 164 and Doniger O'Flaherty 157).

Armed with flowery arrows, Kamadeva is thought to have been born of the creator god Prajapati's heart without the aid of any female component (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 34). Figuring prominently in depictions of Kamadeva are his two wives Rati and Priti – the personifications of sexual delight and affectionate pleasure, respectively (Benton 35). Rati, who was created from Daksa's sweat, possesses beauty that is able to distract even the sages (Benton 28). She carries a discus and lotus and is Kamadeva's assistant, who she was mutually in love with upon meeting. As Kamadeva's aide, Rati enthralls others with desire and satisfies his own sexual needs but does not take on any other wifely duties (Benton 31, 32). Less is known about Priti as she is found more often in art than literature; however, she is present in the story of Karnotpala, an aging woman who had not been able to find a husband (Benton 35). Kamadeva also has three voluptuous daughters that are described as temptresses (Campbell 195).

Discussing the nature of Kamadeva's consorts offers further knowledge about this deity's characteristics. Gandharvas and Apsarases, which are male and female heavenly creatures,

respectively, are usually found in illustrations beside Kamadeva and Rati (Benton 131, 132, 135). The innumerable *gandharvas* and *apsarases* are related to the air and water components of clouds, as they move between earth and Indra's heaven, where they reside, taking on various appearances to aid Kamadeva's work (Benton 132, 133, 135, 137). The mesmerizing beauty, erotic nature, and seductive skills of the *apsarases* have even been called on by Indra to weaken the power certain *yogis* and ascetics have cultivated (Benton 133, 134). These creatures are thought to provoke madness, yearning, and disappointment but are also thought to be auspicious because they convey the possibility for joy and prosperity (Benton 135). Gandharvas are believed capable of seducing women with their attractive bodies and beautiful singing, which may also induce feelings of madness. These celestial beings share a connection with horses and are purported to have the ability to restore virility, sometimes through the use of herbal remedies (Benton 137).

In addition to the *gandharvas* and *apsarases* that are depicted with Kamadeva, his green parrot vehicle, or *vahana*, is traditionally shown at his feet and a mythical sea animal called a *makara* is depicted on his banner (Benton 131, 132). The appropriateness of Kamadeva's vehicle is demonstrated by the affectionate nature parrots show toward one another and their human-like capability for speech (Benton 132). These two qualities, along with the fact that parrots are monogamous, give credit to the notion that parrots are wise to matters of the heart (Benton 141). The relation between Kamadeva and the *makara* is less clear although speculations can be made by examining the character of the Indian crocodile and river dolphin (Benton 142, 144). [For example, the oil of the Susu river dolphin is sought after as an aphrodisiac, love potion, and cure for impotence and its meat is consumed to increase virility (Benton 146, 148).] It is important to note, however, that neither the *gandharvas*, *apsarases*,

parrot, nor *makara* play a role in the stories involving Kamadeva, although they are consistently portrayed in art of this deity (Benton 131).

According to the Silpa Sastras, Kamadeva is to be formally portrayed with the season of spring, Vasanta, and the *makara* banner is to be carried by a horse-faced being, whose appearance connotes the virility of horses (Benton 131, 132). Furthermore, Kamadeva should wear a garland of flowers, among other ornaments, and be armed with his sugarcane bow and five arrows made with flowers (Benton 131). These “five arrows are made of the sun lotus, the asoka flower, the mango, jasmine, and blue lotus, and they cause infatuation, excitement, parching or withering, heating, and paralysis (or stiffening)” (Doniger O’Flaherty 159). The Kamadeva also has gold coloring (Benton 16). In contrast to this iconographic description, it is rare to find the male deity Vasanta in images with Kamadeva, perhaps because his svelte body might divert onlookers’ attention. [For a discussion of Vasanta and the Maras as Kamadeva’s companions, see Benton 32-34]. Similarly, it is uncommon to find the banner-carrier in depictions with Kamadeva (Benton 132). [Certain similarities can be found between Kamadeva and the water god Varuna, who is called on by individuals suffering from unreciprocated love (Benton 137, 139). Like Kamadeva, Varuna is associated with the virility of horses and the *makara* (Benton 139).]

Perhaps Kamadeva’s most significant role in Sanskrit literature occurs in the Saiva Puranas (Klostermaier 152). Here, Kamadeva is characterized as Siva’s sexual opponent. As a great ascetic, Siva must refrain from desire, yet as the god of the *linga* and husband to Parvati, he must fulfill his sexual obligations and produce offspring (although he does this grudgingly) (Doniger O’Flaherty 154, 262). It is in this way that Kamadeva exercises power over the other gods. In these texts the god of love momentarily meets his demise after interrupting Siva’s

meditations and being burned by his eye in an instance of fury (Klostermaier 152). Creating the context for this event is the granting of a boon by Brahma to the demon Taraka as a reward for his asceticism. More powerful than even Siva or Visnu, Taraka proceeded to steal the wives of all of the gods, creating much fear and despair among them. Upon fleeing to Brahma, the gods are informed that Taraka was rendered invincible to their powers but could be killed by an offspring of the childless Siva. After discussion occurs among the deities, Indra beckons Kamadeva, who cannot be destroyed by demons or gods and who permeates the entire cosmos, including Brahma. Indra instructs Kamadeva to fill Siva with desire and move him to marry Parvati so that they may have a child. With Rati and the spring season in tow, Kamadeva comes close to the place where Siva was deep in meditation but is first confronted by Sailadi, who was guarding the area. In order to by pass Sailadi, Kamadeva turned himself into a sweet-scented breeze. Finding Siva, Kamadeva stood with his bow drawn. At this time, Siva was distracted by Parvati and sensing that Kamadeva was present, burned him with his eye before he was able to release an arrow. Siva then offered Parvati a boon but she had no desire for it as she believed that without Kamadeva happiness could not be possible. Siva was then beckoned by Kali, to whom he granted a boon. She requested that he let Kamadeva live, which he did, although in a bodiless form (Doniger O'Flaherty 154-159). A slightly different interpretation of this story grants Parvati a more active role, as it is she who enlists Kamadeva's skills to help her win Siva over (Klostermaier 152). Another version also comments on the influence of Rati when pleading for her husband's rebirth (Benton 31). [Kamadeva also plays a role in the story of "Pradyumna and the Fish" (see Dimmitt and van Buitenen 141, 142) and the tale of how "Siva Engenders the Submarine Mare" (see Doniger O'Flaherty 159-161).]

As symbols of love and fertility, images of both Kamadeva and Rati are found in temples (Benton 131). Although *vratas* (conditional vows made to a deity), *pujas* (deity worship), and *utsavas* (festivals) involving Kamadeva are extremely rare, and perhaps have always been, they deserve mention because they demonstrate a connection between desire and spirituality that tends to be absent in many religions (Benton 93). It is important to note, however, that the sole worship of Kamadeva does not appear to be a widely acceptable practice today (Benton 102). Nonetheless, several *pujas*, described in the *Agni Purana*, can be performed by the devotee to attract a lost lover, or to increase one's prosperity, among other things. Many other *vratas* and *pujas* devoted to Kamadeva are described elsewhere and include the worship of the *damanaka* plant (a symbol of this god) during the Kama Trayodasi. To gain the attention of Kamadeva and Rati, art and music are often used during these rituals. While the goals of the devotees can be quite diverse, certain *vratas* are performed for more specific reasons, as is the case in the *vrata* for prostitutes, who seek a successful rebirth. [For information on *vratas* for prostitutes and fertility, see Benton 96-99, and see Benton 99-101 for "Rituals for Beauty and Husbands: Tirthas for Couples."] There is evidence of a festival, called Kamadeva's Day, during which male followers would perform certain rituals to be reborn in a handsome, desirable body. Kamadeva's Day would be held during March or April, which is the month of Caitra, at the Ahalya Tirtha (Benton 94). Indeed, the month of Caitra and Vaisakha (April-May) remain the most popular time for weddings, during which Kamadeva is often incorporated (Benton 102). [During Kamadeva's Festival, which is mentioned in the drama *Carudatta* by Bhasa, many love-marriages took place (Benton 94).]

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

- Benton, Catherine (2006) *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Campbell, Joseph (1974) *The Mythic Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dimmitt, Cornelia, and van Buitenen, J.A.B. (eds. and trans.) (1978) *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy (1975) *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*. Ed. Betty Radice. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Fausboll, V. (1981) *Indian Mythology: According to the Indian Epics*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. (2000) *Hinduism: A Short History*. Oxford: One World Publications.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Rati
Priti
Karnotpala
Gandharvas
Apsarases
Makara
Parrots
Indian crocodile
Indian river dolphins
Vasanta
Varuna
Maras
Parvati
Taraka
Indra
Sailadi
“Pradyumna and the Fish”
“Siva Engenders the Submarine Mare”
Damanaka plant
Vrata for prostitutes
Horses
Kamadeva's Day and Festival
Siva

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/kamadeva.html>

<http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/aa021201a.htm>

<http://www.thecolorsofindia.com/holi-legends/sacrifice-of-kamadeva.html>

<http://www.exoticindiaart.com/product/DC75/>

<http://www.indiaprofile.com/religion-culture/kama.htm>

<http://www.pantheon.org/articles/k/kama.html>

Article written by: Katie Herzog (March 2008) who is solely responsible for its content.